

Review of the Herbarium

“One of the best things about this exquisite book, is that it is quite tricky to pin down exactly what kind of a publication it is. Given the title (and the size) of this very slim volume, you might expect a brief introduction to herbs and their various uses. Before long, however, the quality of the writing, and the extraordinary range of ideas and connections being made, reveal that you are holding something much more ambitious and altogether much more original.

Mia Parnall does her best to explain what kind of publication this is in her introduction. She dithers in trying to define it, but rightly so. It is, so we are told, ‘a handbook, but not a straightforward guide.’ It is ‘a map of points of convergence between the human body and natural world.’ It is ‘a short history of herbalism.’ All of this is true, but to read on is to find yourself reflecting upon the kind of sensations and memories which are usually way beyond the reach of language, and which defy easy summary.

In a series of five essays, Mia Parnall tries to explain how our human bodies connect with the world of plants. She considers the basic aspects of life which we share with plants, not the least, our need for water, air and sunlight. And yet she believes our association with plants goes even deeper, for they connect us to our own past, our roots. They are truly, she states, ‘our fellow participants in the natural Mesh, who we recognise like neighbours from a place we once lived.’ The book then proceeds to dig into the history of herbalism and into the very origins of medicinal science. The early study of herbs, we are told, nurtured a less mechanical, more organic sense of what it means to be human. ‘It was the herbalist’s view,’ she writes, ‘of the body as an organic, flowering, vital thing, requiring ongoing care and intuitive attention, that would prove the most significant of them all: an elixir contra the man-as-machine.’

It was the ideas in this chapter which reminded me of George Eliot’s solitary weaver, Silas Marner, who had been taught by his mother how to alleviate heart problems by a ‘simple preparation of foxglove.’ This rare skill marked out Silas as a somewhat sinister, occult-dabbling figure, even though he managed to do quite a lot of good in his community, and with great kindness. It was good, too, to come across other similarly obscure characters in this book, most notably ‘The Society of Skilful Aunts,’ a group of wise (and, apparently, bearded) women based in the Scilly Isles during the eighteenth century, who frequently nursed

their fellow islanders, painstakingly drawing on their own research into the healing properties of plants.

History and herbalism aside, at the core of this book nestles a very special chapter – Thinking With The Nose - concerning our deep need to smell the natural world around us. Mia Parnall is brilliant when it comes to describing the most elusive senses of them all. ‘One is always struck,’ she writes, ‘when, if one returns to one’s own primary school, the smell of plastic and poster paint unnoticed in our younger days bombards the nostrils with an almost stressful specificity.’ Her sentences always go the extra mile when trying to convey the sensuous nature of being alive. (In many ways, this chapter reminded me of another very good book about nasal thinking which appeared recently – Orwell’s Nose, by John Sutherland).

The watercolours, by Marion Bretagne, provide a perfect and subtle accompaniment to the text. The Venus fly trap, the bees, the luscious poppy, the Rosemary and the Vetiver (not to mention ‘the nose’) - are exquisitely rendered and deserve a review of their own. When you finish this book, there is nothing for it but to go out and do a spot of ‘forest bathing’ yourself. It is a book that makes you want to start sniffing away, noticing and remembering. Back indoors, I had to read it all over again, this time while listening to Stevie Wonder’s Secret Life of Plants:

I can’t conceive the nucleus of all

Begins inside a tiny seed

And what we see as insignificant

Provides the purest air we breathe

Dr Mark Crees